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A Comparative Historical Analysis of the Failure of Foreign Interventions in the State-Building Process of Afghanistan (1839–2021)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the structural and historical determinants underlying the recurrent failures of foreign-led state-building projects in Afghanistan across three discrete historical intervals: British imperial engagement (1839–1919), Soviet military occupation (1979–1989), and the United States-led multinational intervention (2001–2021). Employing a comparative-historical methodology grounded in interpretivist epistemology, the analysis synthesizes archival diplomatic records, international organization reports, longitudinal aid-expenditure data, and peer-reviewed scholarship to construct a theoretically integrated explanatory model. Critically, and in contrast to existing accounts that either treat each intervention episode in isolation or privilege exclusively cultural-historical narratives—as in Barfield's foundational work—or political economy frameworks alone—as in Rubin's seminal analyses—this paper advances an original four-mechanism model: structural misfit, delegitimizing cascades, the aid-rentier pathology, and path-dependent lock-in. What sets this contribution apart is the demonstration that these mechanisms do not operate in parallel but interact dynamically across time, with each reinforcing the others to produce a self-sustaining cycle of governance failure that no single-variable account adequately captures. The findings reveal that governance collapse in Afghanistan was not episodic but structurally overdetermined: external actors persistently misread the relational logic governing Afghan political order, substituting imported institutional templates for organic authority networks while simultaneously severing the fiscal bond between the state and its citizens through massive aid inflows that peaked at approximately 75 percent of public expenditure under United States sponsorship and exceeded 90 percent under Soviet administration. These conditions collectively produced rentier governance structures in which executive accountability was oriented toward donor priorities rather than citizen demands, eroding popular legitimacy and fueling cyclical insurgency across all three eras. The study advances a theoretically coherent and empirically grounded account with implications extending beyond Afghanistan to the broader science of international state-building.

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Introduction

The construction of viable political authority in conflict-affected states has emerged as one of the most consequential and theoretically contested challenges confronting the international order since the end of the Cold War (Williams, 2005; Yar et al., 2022). As multipolar security threats proliferated and the norms of liberal internationalism gained institutional momentum, the enterprise of externally directed state-building expanded dramatically—characterized by the deployment of substantial military, financial, and administrative resources in service of transforming fragile polities into

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self-sustaining governance systems (Paris, 1997; Mishra, 2022). Yet the empirical record of these interventions remains deeply troubling. Despite unprecedented resource commitments, foreign-sponsored efforts to build lasting institutions in environments such as Iraq, Somalia, Haiti, and Libya have yielded outcomes marked by renewed conflict, institutional hollowness, and accelerating erosion of public trust (Mako, 2021; Hersi, 2025; Einsiedel, 2006; Gargoum, 2022). Even programs designed with technical sophistication falter when the structural conditions of host societies resist the assumptions embedded within externally derived blueprints (Barbara, 2008; Wulf, 2007). The persistence of these failures across diverse geographic, cultural, and ideological settings demands explanation that moves beyond case-specific contingency toward structural and theoretical generalization (Downes, 2013; Wafa & Yar, 2024).

Afghanistan occupies a unique position within this broader landscape, not merely as one instance of intervention failure among several, but as an extended natural experiment in which three successive major powers—each operating under distinct ideological mandates, with access to different resource pools, and pursuing divergent strategic objectives—attempted to construct durable state authority over a period spanning more than 180 years (Akhtar, 2024; Hopgood, 2017; Tanner, 2003). The British Empire's three engagements between 1839 and 1919 reflected the strategic imperatives of the Great Game and indirect imperial governance; the Soviet Union's decade-long occupation from 1979 to 1989 sought radical socio-economic transformation aligned with Marxist-Leninist doctrine; and the United States-led coalition's twenty-year presence from 2001 to 2021 pursued counterterrorism goals fused with liberal democratic state-building objectives (Rubin, 2020; Barfield, 2021). In each case, massive external resources flowed into a political environment defined by tribal segmentation, limited fiscal sovereignty, and deep distrust of centralized authority—and in each case, the externally supported state structure ultimately collapsed (Rashed, 2026; Mishra, 2022; Murtazashvili, 2022). The August 2021 transition of authority exposed, with unusual clarity, the fragility of two decades of institutionalization and the degree to which formal governmental structures had failed to develop autonomous legitimacy (Author, 2025; Yar et al., 2024).

The scholarly literature on Afghanistan and state-building more broadly provides valuable descriptive accounts but leaves significant analytical gaps that this study addresses directly. First, prior scholarship—including landmark contributions by Barfield (2021) and Rubin (2020)—has tended either to privilege cultural and historical narrative at the expense of causal mechanism or to emphasize political economy without adequately integrating the legitimacy dynamics and path-dependent trajectories that sustained governance failure across multiple interventions. No existing study systematically integrates all three theoretical dimensions—legitimacy, path dependency, and aid dependence—into a unified causal model nor demonstrates empirically how these forces interact to amplify rather than merely coexist with one another. Second, the temporal segmentation characteristic of most scholarship obscures cumulative institutional erosion that unfolds across generational time horizons; by treating British, Soviet, and American interventions as discrete cases rather than as episodes within a continuous political trajectory, prior work underestimates the degree to which each failure created structural preconditions for the next (Akhtar, 2024). Third, insufficient analytical attention has been paid to the fiscal sociology of Afghan governance—specifically to the way in which the substitution of foreign aid for domestic taxation systematically inverted the accountability relationship between state and society, generating what this study terms the 'aid-rentier pathology' (Moore et al., 2021; Knack, 2021).

Against this background, the present study advances a four-part contribution to the literature. It develops an integrated causal model linking structural misfit, delegitimating cascades, aid-rentier pathology, and path-dependent lock-in as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of governance failure. It employs a most-different comparative-historical design across three intervention eras to demonstrate that identical mechanisms produce structural failure even when the ideological context, intervening actor, and resource profile differ substantially. It introduces explicit operationalization of key theoretical variables—legitimacy and institutional erosion—through observable proxies amenable to cross-case comparison. Finally, it derives from this analysis concrete and theoretically grounded policy implications for hybrid governance design, domestic revenue mobilization, and the integration of customary institutions. The guiding research questions are: What structural mechanisms account for the persistent failure of foreign interventions to produce durable governance outcomes in Afghanistan? How do foreign aid inflows interact with pre-existing social structures to erode state legitimacy? And what conditions

would need to be met for internationally supported state-building to achieve lasting results?

2. Literature Review

2.1 State-Building: Theoretical Foundations: Contemporary state-building scholarship draws extensively on the Weberian tradition, which defines the state in terms of a legitimate monopoly over the means of coercion within a defined territorial boundary (Fukuyama, 2020). Within this tradition, the consolidation of fiscal capacity, bureaucratic rationality, and coercive reach are treated as the foundational pillars of durable political order—a sequence Tilly (1992) documented empirically in European state formation. However, the translation of this developmental trajectory to post-conflict environments in the Global South has proven theoretically and practically fraught. Contemporary scholars observe that states built primarily through external intervention lack the endogenous social conflicts—over taxation, territorial control, and elite bargaining—that Tilly identified as the engine of organic state formation (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020; Menkhaus, 2021). Where such conflicts are suppressed or displaced by external resource provision, institutional development may proceed on paper while remaining structurally shallow. In weak states, imposed governance frameworks frequently encounter and are undermined by existing customary authority networks and informal rule systems, producing hybrid arrangements that are neither fully traditional nor genuinely modern (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2020; Zürcher, 2021).

2.2 Legitimacy and the Governance Deficit: Legitimacy—the voluntary acceptance of authority as rightful—is widely recognized as the decisive variable distinguishing resilient from fragile state institutions (Gilley, 2020; Levi et al., 2021). While coercive capacity may sustain a government in the short term, lasting governance depends on citizens perceiving the political order as appropriate, procedurally fair, and materially responsive to their needs (Brinkerhoff et al., 2021). In post-conflict contexts, the legitimacy challenge is acutely intensified: externally designed institutions must compete for moral authority with pre-existing traditional structures that carry accumulated social capital and cultural resonance (Paris, 2020; Chandler, 2021). Liberal peacebuilding approaches have often underestimated this dynamic, pursuing rapid institutional templates—elections, constitutions, market liberalization—whose procedural form may appear legitimate from the outside while remaining culturally alien and substantively disconnected from everyday political experience at the community level (Paris, 2010). Research by Brinkerhoff et al. (2021) demonstrates that service delivery that bypasses local intermediaries—relying instead on foreign contractors and non-governmental organizations—tends to sever the associational link between citizen contributions and state outputs, undermining the reciprocity on which legitimacy fundamentally depends.

2.3 Path Dependency: The Weight of Historical Structures: Path dependency theory, developed principally within comparative politics, holds that the institutional arrangements established at critical historical junctures exert disproportionate influence over subsequent trajectories, making fundamental structural reform exceptionally difficult even when new resources and political intentions are available (Pierson, 2021; Mahoney & Thelen, 2021). For Afghanistan, this theoretical lens is particularly illuminating: the clan-based social organization, the decentralized segmentary political structure, and the tradition of armed resistance to centralized authority were not merely cultural facts but historically reinforced institutional configurations through which resource allocation, dispute resolution, and political identity were organized (Barfield, 2021). Critically, each episode of external intervention—rather than dissolving these structures—interacted with them in ways that deepened their political salience. British subsidy payments reinforced tribal khans' brokerage power; Soviet party networks co-opted customary leaders while destroying alternative institutional pathways; and American counterterrorism partnerships reactivated warlord networks whose power had been partly curtailed in the late 1990s (Rubin, 2020; Dorronsoro, 2021). The result was a series of critical junctures that locked in structural configurations resistant to state-building pressures, as Capoccia and Kelemen (2021) document for comparable fragile state settings.

2.4 Aid Dependence and the Fiscal Sociology of Governance Failure: A theoretically underappreciated dimension of intervention failure concerns the political economy of foreign aid—specifically, the way in which massive external resource flows alter the incentive structure of governments and elites in recipient states. Foundational scholarship by Bräutigam and Knack (2021) demonstrates that high levels of foreign aid are inversely associated with governance quality across a broad sample of developing countries, a relationship partially explained by the attenuation of domestic fiscal accountability: governments that do not depend on citizen taxation face

weaker popular demands for service delivery, transparency, and responsive policymaking. This dynamic is particularly severe when aid is delivered off-budget—bypassing national treasury systems—since it erodes administrative capacity while simultaneously signaling to citizens that the state is an instrument of foreign rather than domestic interests (Ahmed et al., 2021; Knack, 2021). Moore et al. (2021) extend this analysis to argue that taxation is not merely a fiscal instrument but a foundational political relationship: the negotiation over who owes what to the state is constitutive of citizenship, accountability, and political trust. Where aid substitutes for this relationship, the governance contract between state and society is hollowed out.

2.5 The Theoretical Collision: How Path Dependency, Legitimacy, and Aid Dependence Interact: A central weakness of existing scholarship—and the analytical lacuna this study directly addresses—is the tendency to treat legitimacy deficits, path-dependent institutional resistance, and aid-induced governance distortions as parallel explanations for intervention failure rather than as dynamically interacting mechanisms. Specifically, existing accounts have not adequately theorized the causal chain through which these three forces compound one another. This study proposes that the interaction operates as follows: clan-based social structures, reinforced through centuries of path-dependent reproduction, generate a political landscape in which local authority—embodied in tribal jirgas, religious leaders, and customary dispute-resolution mechanisms—commands genuine popular legitimacy that the central state does not. When foreign aid flows bypass local taxation mechanisms—the very fiscal relationship through which state authority might gradually earn popular acceptance—it simultaneously removes the primary instrument through which states build legitimate authority (Moore et al., 2021) and generates rents that can be captured by whichever actors control access to aid pipelines, usually the elite networks already empowered by path-dependent privilege. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle: path-dependent social structures deny the state organic legitimacy; aid dependence removes the fiscal mechanism that might gradually build legitimacy from below; the rents generated by aid inflows are captured by existing power networks, deepening both inequality and institutional distrust; and the delegitimating cascade that follows provides the social fuel for insurgent alternatives claiming to represent authentic local governance. No prior study synthesizes these three theoretical threads into an integrated causal model with explicit empirical referents across multiple historical cases (Pierson, 2021; Barfield, 2021; Knack, 2021; Gilley, 2020).

2.6 Historical Scholarship on Afghanistan: Historical research into Afghan state-building reflects the same theoretical fragmentation. Barfield's (2021) authoritative political and cultural history documents the recurring failure of central authority to penetrate the segmented tribal periphery across multiple centuries, providing an invaluable account of structural constraints, but primarily from a cultural and institutional standpoint without developing a systematic causal framework applicable to comparative cases. Rubin's (2020) political economy analysis of the Soviet-era and post-Cold War Afghan state identifies the fiscal and patronage dimensions of governance failure with precision, but his framework is primarily synchronic and does not adequately account for how British-era institutional legacies constrained Soviet possibilities or how Soviet-era elite configurations shaped the post-2001 landscape. Scholarship on the American period—notably SIGAR (2021), Suhrke (2021), and Miklaucic (2022)—provides detailed documentation of specific programmatic failures but typically lacks the theoretical depth to connect particular governance breakdowns to the broader structural dynamics explored here. By integrating these bodies of knowledge within a unified theoretical framework and subjecting it to systematic comparative-historical analysis, this study makes a contribution that no existing source individually achieves.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Defining Core Concepts: Theoretical clarity requires that the central analytical concepts employed in this study be precisely defined in the specific institutional and historical context of Afghanistan—rather than appropriated in their generic form from broader political science literature, where definitional imprecision often obscures rather than illuminates empirical reality.

3.2 The Four-Mechanism Causal Model: Drawing on path dependency theory (Pierson, 2021; Mahoney & Thelen, 2021), legitimacy scholarship (Gilley, 2020; Levi et al., 2021), and the political economy of aid dependence (Knack, 2021; Moore et al., 2021; Bräutigam & Knack, 2021), this study proposes a four-mechanism causal model that explains why externally sponsored state-building projects in Afghanistan have consistently failed across radically different historical contexts. The four mechanisms—structural misfit, delegitimation cascade, aid-rentier pathology, and path-dependent lock-in—are

presented not as independent variables but as dynamically interrelated components of a single causal system in which each mechanism activates and amplifies the others.

The first mechanism, structural misfit, refers to the fundamental incompatibility between the centralized, bureaucratic governance architecture promoted by foreign powers and the segmented, non-hierarchical political organization characteristic of Afghan society (Barfield, 2021; Zürcher, 2021). External institutions were designed on the assumption that authority could be rationalized through legal mandate and administrative hierarchy, whereas Afghan political order was constituted through relational networks of kinship, reciprocity, and negotiated autonomy. This misfit ensured that formal institutions would lack behavioral compliance—citizens would interact with them instrumentally when necessary to access resources but would continue to resolve genuine disputes and organize political identity through customary channels.

The second mechanism, the delegitimating cascade, describes the sequential process by which each failure of externally imposed institutions to deliver expected governance outcomes reduces popular trust in the state and redirects political loyalty toward alternative authorities (Brinkerhoff et al., 2021; Miklaucic, 2022). Because external actors typically respond to governance failures by intensifying aid inflows and bureaucratic interventions rather than by addressing structural misfits, each remedial attempt produces diminishing returns while simultaneously deepening the perception that the state is an instrument of foreign interests rather than a servant of the Afghan population. This perception was particularly damaging in a political culture in which independence from foreign domination carries powerful normative resonance (Hopkins, 2021; Rubin, 2020).

The third mechanism, the aid-rentier pathology, captures the fiscal-political dynamic by which massive external aid inflows transform governance from a system of social contract—where citizens pay taxes in exchange for services and hold rulers accountable through fiscal leverage—into a system of rentier extraction, where rulers distribute foreign-sourced rents to maintain loyalty among strategic elites while facing no domestic revenue pressures to perform (Lake, 2021; Moore et al., 2021). This mechanism operates with particular force when aid bypasses the national budget—as occurred extensively during the post-2001 period—because off-budget flows simultaneously weaken administrative systems while generating rents that can be captured outside formal accountability channels (SIGAR, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

The fourth mechanism, path-dependent lock-in, describes the self-reinforcing character of institutional dysfunction: once aid-rentier dynamics and structural misfit are established, they generate distributional coalitions—among elite beneficiaries of aid capture, among customary authorities whose power is sustained by the weakness of formal institutions, and among external actors whose organizational mandates require continued engagement—that actively resist the structural reforms needed to break the cycle (Pierson, 2021; Capoccia & Kelemen, 2021). Critical junctures, such as changes in foreign policy, economic crisis, or military shift, can theoretically disrupt these coalitions, but the evidence across all three Afghan cases is that such disruptions more frequently precipitate collapse than enable genuine institutional reconstruction.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design: This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology, applying a comparative-historical methodology to investigate the structural determinants of foreign intervention failure across multiple historical cases (George & Bennett, 2021; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020). The interpretivist framework is appropriate for the analytical objectives of this research, which require attending to the meaning-making processes through which political actors construct institutions, interpret authority claims, and respond to legitimacy signals—processes that are not reducible to quantitative measurement without significant loss of theoretical insight. The comparative-historical approach is specifically suited to explaining complex political phenomena characterized by multiple interacting causes operating over extended time horizons, and it is widely considered the methodological gold standard for identifying structural regularities across historically specific cases (Mahoney & Thelen, 2021; Beach & Pedersen, 2020).

4.2 Case Selection and Comparative Logic: The three cases examined—British imperial intervention (1839–1919), Soviet military engagement (1979–1989), and the United States-led coalition intervention (2001–2021)—were selected on the basis of a most-different systems design (Gerring, 2021). This design compares cases that differ substantially on theoretically relevant background variables—intervening power, ideological

orientation, available technology, and international context—while sharing the outcome of governance failure. The logic of the design holds that when structurally dissimilar cases converge on the same outcome through demonstrably similar causal mechanisms, the role of those mechanisms in producing the outcome is strongly confirmed while case-specific explanations are correspondingly weakened (Mahoney & Thelen, 2021). The longitudinal scope of the study—spanning approximately 180 years—enables analysis of path-dependent processes and cumulative institutional effects that are invisible in studies limited to single interventions or short time periods.

4.3 Data Sources: Data collection employs a multi-source triangulation strategy designed to maximize the empirical credibility of the analysis while accommodating the challenges of historical research spanning three centuries. Primary sources include archival diplomatic correspondence, colonial administrative reports, Afghan government documents where accessible, and primary military records. Secondary sources encompass documents published by international organizations—including the World Bank (2021), UNDP (2022), and SIGAR (2021)—as well as peer-reviewed academic scholarship and quantitative datasets on aid flows, governance indicators, and fiscal capacity. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that sources represent the credible range of perspectives on each case, including both external observer accounts and scholarship drawing on Afghan-language primary materials (Saldaña, 2021).

4.4 Operationalization of Key Variables: A significant methodological improvement over prior studies is the explicit operationalization of the theoretical concepts central to this analysis. Table 2 presents the operational indicators employed for each key variable, along with their associated data sources. This operationalization enables cross-case comparison on a common empirical basis and facilitates the replication and extension of the analysis by future researchers.

Table 1 Operationalization of Key Theoretical Variables

Variable	Operational **Indicators**	Data Sources
Legitimacy	Frequency of armed uprisings per decade (normalized by territorial control); voluntary tax compliance rate; share of disputes resolved through state courts vs. customary jirga/shura mechanisms	Rubin (2020); Giustozzi (2021); Barfield (2021); SIGAR (2021); Gilley (2020); Levi et al. (2021)
Institutional **Erosion**	Ratio of off-budget foreign funding to on-budget domestic revenue; public sector wage-to-GDP ratio; number of functional district administrative offices; aid-to-tax revenue ratio over time	World Bank (2021); OECD (2021); Knack (2021); Moore et al. (2021); Pain (2020); UNDP (2022)
Structural Mismatch	Degree of overlap between formal administrative units and traditional authority boundaries; proportion of governance decisions made through state vs. customary channels; geographic reach of state service delivery	Barfield (2021); Mac Ginty & Richmond (2020); Murtazashvili (2022); Dorronsoro (2021)
Aid Dependence	Share of public expenditure financed by external sources; percentage of aid delivered off-budget; ratio of donor-to-domestic revenue; existence of conditionality-driven policy changes	World Bank (2021); SIGAR (2021); Byrd & Ward (2022); Ahmed et al. (2021); Bräutigam & Knack (2021)

Note. Indicators were selected based on data availability across all three historical cases and theoretical alignment with the four-mechanism model developed in Section 3.

4.5 Analytical Strategy: The primary analytical strategy is theory-directed process tracing—a method that systematically reconstructs the causal mechanisms through which specified independent conditions produce observed political outcomes, enabling both within-case

causal inference and across-case pattern comparison (Beach & Pedersen, 2020). The analytical procedure proceeds in four steps: development of precise causal hypotheses specifying how each of the four mechanisms produces governance failure; reconstruction of historical causal chains to identify critical junctures and mechanism activation sequences; testing of hypothesized mechanisms against empirical evidence using hoop tests and smoking-gun procedures; and cross-case comparison to identify recurring patterns that confirm the general applicability of the model (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2021). Qualitative content analysis of policy documents and institutional reports was conducted using thematic coding procedures, following Saldaña's (2021) coding manual for qualitative researchers. Analytical rigor is maintained through data triangulation across multiple independent sources, transparent documentation of the coding process to enable replication, theoretical triangulation combining state-building and political economy frameworks to minimize monocausal interpretation, and reflexive attention to researcher positionality and potential interpretive bias (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2020).

5. Results: Comparative Historical Analysis

5.1 Structural Preconditions Across All Three Cases: Before examining each intervention episode individually, it is analytically important to characterize the structural preconditions that remained consistent—and consistently misread by external actors—across all three cases. Afghan political order has historically been organized around a segmentary tribal system in which authority is dispersed across kinship groups, with effective decision-making power residing at the community level rather than in any hierarchically superior center (Barfield, 2021). This organization is not a developmental deficit but a historically evolved institutional arrangement that performed essential social functions—resource management, dispute arbitration, collective defense, and marriage alliance—with considerable effectiveness within its own logic. Central governments that succeeded in exercising genuine authority over Afghan territory did so not by displacing this system but by negotiating with it—specifically, by offering subsidies, symbolic recognition, and selective service delivery to tribal intermediaries in exchange for nominal compliance and revenue sharing (Rubin, 2020; Hopkins, 2021). Governments that attempted to bypass or subordinate this system through bureaucratic centralization and uniform policy application consistently faced organized resistance, which was interpreted by external observers as irrational obstructionism but which reflected the rational defense of functional institutional arrangements against perceived administrative encroachment.

Fiscal incapacity was the structural corollary of this political arrangement. Without the capacity to impose and collect taxes across the national territory—a capacity that is in any case inseparable from having a monopoly on legitimate authority—Afghan central governments were chronically dependent on external revenue sources. This dependency was not incidental but structural: it meant that each new government, regardless of its ideological character, inherited a fiscal constitution in which sovereignty was conditional on outside financial support. When that support was withdrawn or proved insufficient to satisfy the competing demands of elite coalition management, governance capacity deteriorated rapidly (Moore et al., 2021; Tilly, 1992).

5.2 British Imperial Intervention (1839–1919): Subsidized Sovereignty and Elite Capture

The British intervention across three Anglo-Afghan Wars reveals the earliest and most clearly documented instance of the aid-rentier pathology operating in Afghan political conditions. British engagement from 1839 onward rested primarily on what contemporaries and historians alike have described as 'subsidized sovereignty'—the practice of paying tribal sardars, khans, and regional commanders regular stipends to maintain nominal allegiance to a Kabul-based authority of British design (Hopkins, 2021; Dalrymple, 2021). This arrangement was strategically economical from a British perspective but had the systemic consequence of creating a political marketplace in which loyalty was a transactable commodity contingent on continued payments rather than an expression of genuine institutional authority (Barfield, 2021).

The structural consequences of this approach were starkly revealed in the catastrophic failure of the First Anglo-Afghan War. The government of Shah Shuja al-Mulk, installed in Kabul in 1839 with British military support, possessed no independent revenue base and no meaningful administrative reach beyond the capital and a small number of garrisoned cities. When the British Political Mission under Sir William Macnaghten attempted in late 1841 to reduce tribal stipend payments as a cost-cutting measure, the response was immediate and decisive: the withholding of payments directly triggered the uprising that resulted in Macnaughton's assassination and the annihilation of the approximately 16,500-strong

British force and camp followers during the January 1842 Kabul retreat (Dalrymple, 2021). This sequence illustrates with unusual precision the aid-rentier pathology: governance collapsed within weeks of aid reduction precisely because no alternative fiscal or administrative foundation had been constructed during the preceding years of occupation. Revenue collection in rural areas remained negligible throughout the period; customs revenues that sustained Kabul's limited treasury depended on trade routes controlled by the same tribal intermediaries receiving British stipends, creating a circular dependency that precluded any autonomous fiscal development (Hopkins, 2021).

The Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878–1880) generated a modified strategic response—support for Abdur Rahman Khan's indigenous consolidation of power—but reproduced the underlying structural failure through different institutional channels. Rather than administering Afghanistan directly, the British sponsored Abdur Rahman precisely because he could exercise territorial control without requiring British military garrisons, thereby reducing imperial costs. The price of this arrangement was the continuation of a substantial British subsidy, which by 1893 was set at approximately £120,000 annually and constituted a significant portion of Kabul's effective revenue base (Hopkins, 2021). Crucially, even Abdur Rahman's relatively more successful administrative modernization—his expansion of a standing army, rudimentary telegraph system, and regularized taxation of northern agricultural provinces—depended heavily on this British subsidy and on the coercive extraction of resources from non-resistant communities, rather than on negotiated fiscal contracts that might have generated genuine legitimacy (Barfield, 2021). Local sardars who were co-opted into the administrative system leveraged their positions to build personal patronage networks and extract rents from trade and land, rather than subordinating themselves to bureaucratic accountability hierarchies. The pattern of elite capture—where external resources are appropriated by local intermediaries to entrench personal authority rather than strengthen state institutions—appears at this historical moment with striking clarity (Dorronsoro, 2021; Barfield, 2021).

By the time of the Third Anglo-Afghan War (1919) and Afghanistan's achievement of full sovereignty under the Treaty of Rawalpindi, the administrative legacy of eight decades of British engagement was a political landscape defined by competing patronage hierarchies dependent on external subsidy, an urban fiscal system chronically dependent on trade revenues and foreign payments, virtually no history of successful mass taxation in rural areas, and a population whose political identity was organized primarily around resistance to external control. These structural conditions constituted a set of path-dependent institutional legacies that would constrain every subsequent attempt at state-building for the remainder of the twentieth century and beyond (Barfield, 2021; Rubin, 2020). The British era thus generated not merely a governance failure but a structural precedent that reinforced the very features of Afghan political organization—subsidy dependence, elite fragmentation, and customary autonomy—that made centralized governance difficult.

5.3 Soviet Intervention (1979–1989): Radical Reform, Fiscal Collapse, and Path-Dependent Lock-In: Soviet intervention beginning in December 1979 represented the most ideologically ambitious attempt to reorganize the Afghan political economy from first principles—yet it reproduced structurally analogous pathologies through different institutional channels and with greater speed. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) government, particularly under the Taraki and Amin administrations, launched a series of radical reform decrees in 1978 that sought to restructure rural property relations and debt obligations. Decree No. 6 cancelled peasant debts to landlords, and Decree No. 8 imposed compulsory land redistribution—potentially transformative measures that, implemented without administrative capacity to enforce, explain, or compensate for them, effectively dismantled the social structures through which rural governance had previously operated (Dorronsoro, 2021; Rubin, 2020). Traditional landowners, religious figures, and village maleks—precisely the intermediary actors through whom any effective tax collection or administrative reach would have had to flow—were targeted as class enemies, eliminating the social infrastructure of governance without replacing it with functional alternatives.

The consequences for fiscal capacity and rural legitimacy were immediate and severe. Tax collection in rural areas, already limited under the pre-coup Daoud government, collapsed nearly entirely as the administrative networks through which revenue had been gathered were dismantled or driven underground by the reform program. In the place of customary intermediaries, the PDPA installed party cadres whose accountability ran upward through the ideological hierarchy rather than outward to

local communities and whose lack of social legitimacy was both a political liability and a security vulnerability (Giustozzi, 2021). By the mid-1980s, Mujahideen field commanders in several provinces were demonstrably more effective at collecting zakat and ushr—traditional Islamic agricultural taxes—than the Soviet-backed central government, whose rural administrative presence had contracted to defended district centers surrounded by hostile territory (Rubin, 2020). This dynamic represents a textbook instance of the delegitimating cascade: each failed attempt at administrative assertion generated organized resistance, which in turn required intensified coercive investment, further alienating rural populations and deepening the governance deficit.

The fiscal dimensions of Soviet support were extreme and mirror the British precedent in structural terms while differing in institutional mechanism. From 1980 onward, Moscow provided the Kabul government with direct budget subsidies, commodity imports, military equipment, and technical advisers whose combined value accounted for over 90 percent of public expenditure by the late 1980s (Giustozzi, 2021; Braithwaite, 2020). This arrangement produced a governance structure in which Afghan ministers, commanders, and party officials had no structural incentive to develop domestic revenue capacity: the Soviet commitment appeared unconditional, and the institutional logic of aid dependence discouraged fiscal innovation just as thoroughly as the British subsidy had a century earlier. When Mikhail Gorbachev initiated the withdrawal process following the 1988 Geneva Accords and when Russia subsequently suspended financial transfers to the Najibullah government in January 1992, institutional disintegration unfolded with extraordinary speed—from a nominally functional central government to territorial fragmentation in a matter of months—directly reflecting the complete absence of any domestically generated fiscal base (Rubin, 2020; Braithwaite, 2020).

Elite manipulation during the Soviet period followed a pattern that, while institutionally distinct from the British case, produced outcomes structurally comparable in their long-term consequences. Soviet-appointed local administrators gained control over the distribution of Soviet assistance—food, agricultural inputs, factory employment, and subsidized commodities—and leveraged this resource control to build personal patronage networks, manipulate local economic conditions, and consolidate political authority that was personal rather than institutional (Dorronsoro, 2021). Particularly in northern provinces, networks built around party distribution systems in the 1980s evolved directly into the militia structures of the 1990s civil war, demonstrating how externally funded elite consolidation creates institutional path dependencies that outlast the intervention itself and reshape the political landscape confronted by the next round of external engagement (Giustozzi, 2021). This trajectory illustrates the path-dependent lock-in mechanism with precision: the Soviet intervention did not merely fail on its own terms but actively reconfigured Afghan political structures in ways that made subsequent state-building more difficult.

5.4 U.S.-Led Intervention (2001–2021): Institutional Scale Without Structural Foundation: The post-2001 intervention represents the most extensively documented case of the four-mechanism failure sequence, combining the largest external resource commitment in Afghan history with the most rapid institutional construction and the most complete subsequent collapse. Though marked by distinct circumstances and the unprecedented scale of international engagement—more than $145 billion in reconstruction aid disbursed over two decades—the episode reproduces all four mechanisms identified in the theoretical framework with analytical clarity, providing strong within-case confirmation of the model's explanatory power (SIGAR, 2021; World Bank, 2021).

Structural misfit was evident from the earliest phase of state construction. The Bonn Agreement of 2001 established a highly centralized presidential republic with authority formally concentrated in Kabul—a design that directly contradicted the decentralized, negotiated character of Afghan political order documented across all previous historical periods (Barfield, 2021). The decision to establish a presidential rather than a parliamentary or federalist system, and to make provincial governors presidential appointees rather than locally selected figures, created a formal architecture of control that bore no relationship to the actual distribution of political authority on the ground (Murtazashvili, 2022). As Barfield (2021) argues with particular force, top-down centralization historically generated resistance rather than compliance in Afghan political conditions; the post-2001 design replicated this error with full access to the historical precedent that should have counseled against it.

Foreign assistance to the post-2001 government covered approximately 75 percent of total public expenditure at its peak, with a significant proportion delivered off-budget through parallel implementation

structures that bypassed national treasury systems (World Bank, 2021; SIGAR, 2021). As a consequence, public agencies did not develop endogenous administrative capacity—instead, they became access points to externally sourced rents, creating powerful incentives for officeholders to maintain their positions through patron-client management rather than by delivering services that would generate popular legitimacy (Suhrke, 2021; Pain, 2020). Institutions multiplied quantitatively—ministries expanded, provincial offices were established, and security forces were recruited in large numbers—while remaining operationally hollow: what Andrews et al. (2017) term "isomorphic mimicry," the adoption of organizational forms that appear functional to external evaluators while lacking the social embeddedness, technical capacity, and resource autonomy that make institutions genuinely effective (Byrd & Ward, 2022).

The security sector exemplifies this dynamic with particular clarity. Afghan National Security Forces were recruited, trained, equipped, and sustained primarily through external provision—including fuel, maintenance, communications, and air support—that could not be replicated domestically when coalition forces withdrew (SIGAR, 2021). The rapid collapse of these forces following the 2021 drawdown—units dissolving without engagement in many areas—reflected not individual failures of courage or commitment but the structural impossibility of sustaining institutions whose operational logic had been built around external enablement rather than internal capacity (UNDP, 2022). The August 2021 transition of authority was in this sense not a sudden disruption but the culmination of a structural trajectory that had been observable in the underlying indicators—the fiscal dependency ratio, the aid-to-tax ratio, the off-budget expenditure share—throughout the preceding decade (Rashed, 2026; Osimen, 2025).

5.5 Comparative Synthesis: The Aid-to-Expenditure Record: Table 2 presents a structured comparison of the key fiscal and institutional dimensions across all three intervention eras. The comparative data reveal that despite radical differences in the ideological orientation, institutional form, and resource scale of each intervention, the structural configuration—high external aid dependency, elite capture of aid flows, negligible domestic fiscal capacity, and collapse upon aid withdrawal—was reproduced with remarkable consistency. This consistency across most different cases provides strong empirical confirmation of the four-mechanism model and specifically of the aid-rentier pathology as the structurally decisive mechanism linking foreign resource provision to institutional collapse.

Table 2 Comparative Aid-to-Expenditure Ratios and Governance Outcomes Across Three Intervention Eras in Afghanistan

Dimension	British Era (1839–1919)	Soviet Era (1979–1989)	U.S.-Led Era (2001–2021)
External revenue share of public expenditure	~60–70% (tribal stipend subsidies)	~90% (Moscow bloc transfers)	~75% (multi-donor budget support)
Primary aid mechanism	Direct tribal stipends to sardars and khans	Unconditional Soviet bloc transfers	Multi-donor funds + off-budget channels
Domestic tax capacity	Negligible outside Kabul; customs dependent on trade routes	Near-zero in rural areas; PDPA reforms destroyed collection networks.	<25% of GDP by 2020; urban concentration
Elite capture pattern	Tribal sardars/khans leveraging stipends for patronage	PDPA party cadres and village maleks extracting rent.	Warlords and technocrat networks monopolizing aid flows
State collapse trigger	Subsidy reduction (1841–42 uprising and Kabul retreat)	Aid cessation by Russia (January 1992)	Coalition troop withdrawal (August 2021)
Primary failure mechanisms	Aid-rentier pathology: structural misfit	Path-dependent lock-in; delegitimizing cascade	All four mechanisms operating simultaneously

Note. Aid/expenditure estimates for the British era are derived from Dalrymple (2021) and Hopkins (2021); Soviet-era estimates from Giustozzi (2021) and Braithwaite (2020); and U.S.-era figures from the World Bank (2021) and SIGAR (2021). Data triangulation was applied across sources.

What Table 1 demonstrates is that the structural trigger for collapse in all three cases was functionally

identical—the reduction or cessation of external financial transfers—regardless of whether that trigger operated through British subsidy cuts (1841), Russian fiscal withdrawal (1992), or coalition troop and contractor departure (2021). The institutional architectures built under each intervention lacked any autonomous fiscal foundation that would have allowed them to sustain operations without external support; they were not merely dependent on foreign resources but constituted by them, in the sense that their organizational logic presupposed the continued availability of those resources (Knack, 2021; Bräutigam & Knack, 2021).

5.6 Legitimacy Indicators Across Cases: Applying the legitimacy operationalization outlined in Table 2 to the historical record generates a consistent cross-case pattern that provides additional empirical confirmation of the delegitimating cascade mechanism. In each case, the frequency of armed uprisings normalized by territorial control increased during intervention periods rather than declining—contrary to the predictions of the intervention strategies, which assumed that institutional construction would progressively consolidate public acceptance of state authority (Rubin, 2020; Dorronsoro, 2021; SIGAR, 2021). Tax compliance rates, measurable with greater precision for the post-2001 period, remained chronically low: the ratio of actual tax collection to statutory obligations never exceeded 20 percent of GDP during the American period, and the majority of this collection was concentrated in urban commercial activity rather than across the national population (World Bank, 2021; Moore et al., 2021). The persistence of traditional dispute resolution through jirgas and shuras—documented by Barfield (2021) as the primary mechanism for conflict management in rural areas throughout all three periods—confirms that the formal judicial system, despite considerable investment in buildings and personnel during the post-2001 period, never displaced customary mechanisms as the primary source of dispute resolution for the majority of Afghans.

These legitimacy indicators collectively suggest that each intervention temporarily generated a surface layer of formal institutional activity without achieving the deeper social acceptance that would have given those institutions resilience against political disruption. The persistence of customary governance mechanisms was not simply a conservative cultural reflex but a rational adaptive response by communities whose prior experiences of externally imposed change—land reform under the Soviets, centralization drives under the Americans—had repeatedly produced disruption without compensating welfare improvements (Barfield, 2021; Dorronsoro, 2021; Brinkerhoff et al., 2021).

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions: The empirical findings presented across all three cases converge on several theoretically significant conclusions that advance understanding beyond the existing literature. The most fundamental contribution is the demonstration that intervention failure in Afghanistan was not episodic—a consequence of particular policy errors or resourcing shortfalls—but structurally overdetermined by the interaction of the four mechanisms identified in the theoretical framework. This finding challenges monocausal accounts that attribute failure to inadequate military force (a view associated with counterinsurgency theorists), insufficient aid volumes (favored by development economists working within aid-effectiveness frameworks), or Western democratic institutions being culturally inappropriate (the culturalist explanation). Each of these accounts captures part of the causal picture while missing the dynamic interaction through which structural misfit, delegitimizing cascades, aid-rentier pathology, and path-dependent lock-in compound one another (Pierson, 2021; Mahoney & Thelen, 2021; Barfield, 2021).

The analysis also generates important theoretical insights regarding the temporal sequencing of governance failure. In all three cases, a common four-stage sequence was observed: initial entry with large-scale military and financial investment producing temporary stabilization; rapid construction of formal institutions that appeared functionally capable but remained dependent on external resources; progressive erosion of governance performance as aid-rentier dynamics deepened and elite capture intensified; and terminal collapse triggered by external resource withdrawal. This temporal regularity across most different cases strongly suggests that the sequence is a structural property of externally sponsored state-building in the specific configuration of conditions present in Afghanistan—rather than an accidental feature of particular policy choices—and therefore has predictive implications for future similar contexts (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2021; Mahoney & Thelen, 2021).

The findings also contribute to theoretical debates about the relationship between state-building and liberal internationalism. Paris (2010, 2020) argues that liberal peacebuilding can be made more effective through more careful sequencing of institutional reforms and greater attention to local conditions. The Afghan evidence across

three centuries suggests a stronger theoretical conclusion: where structural misfit is deep, path dependencies are entrenched, and fiscal preconditions for the social contract do not exist, incremental improvements to liberal state-building designs are insufficient—what is required is a fundamental reconceptualization of the relationship between external support and locally rooted institutional development (Fukuyama, 2021; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2020). This conclusion aligns with and extends Chandler's (2021) critique of liberal peacebuilding while grounding it in a more precisely specified causal mechanism.

6.2 The Fiscal Sociology Mechanism: Aid, Taxation, and Accountability: Perhaps the most analytically under-theorized aspect of Afghan governance failure—and the one with the clearest implications for redesigning external support—is the fiscal sociology of the aid-rentier dynamic. Tilly's (1992) canonical analysis of European state formation identified the negotiation over taxation as the constitutive process through which political accountability was institutionalized: rulers who needed revenues from their subjects were compelled, through repeated bargaining, to offer services, rights, and institutional voice in exchange. This process was never initiated in Afghanistan under any of the three interventions because foreign resources substituted for domestic taxation before any fiscal bargaining could take root (Moore et al., 2021; Knack, 2021). The consequence was not merely that governance was financially dependent on outside support but that the associational tissue connecting citizens to state institutions—the expectation of reciprocal service delivery in exchange for fiscal contribution—was never developed. Governments accountable to donors rather than taxpayers had every institutional incentive to perform for external evaluators rather than for Afghan citizens, producing the pattern of governance theater—progress reports, anti-corruption commissions, institutional blueprints—that bore little relationship to actual administrative performance (SIGAR, 2021; Byrd & Ward, 2022).

The post-2001 period offers particularly granular evidence of this dynamic. Despite the establishment of a Ministry of Finance, a formal tax authority, and international technical assistance for revenue mobilization, domestic revenue as a share of GDP remained consistently below 12 percent throughout the occupation period—among the lowest in the world—while aid dependency remained above 75 percent of public expenditure (World Bank, 2021; Pain, 2020). This is not simply a failure of administrative capacity but evidence of a systematic incentive misalignment: a government that does not need its citizens' taxes does not need to earn their compliance, and a citizenry that does not pay state taxes has correspondingly weak institutional claims on state performance. Breaking this cycle requires not merely technical improvements in tax administration but a deliberate political strategy of transitioning governance finance from external aid to domestic revenue—a transition that is inherently politically costly and therefore difficult to implement under conditions of external support that make it economically unnecessary (Moore et al., 2021; OECD, 2021; Ahmed et al., 2021).

6.3 Social Structure and Governance Architecture: The consistent failure of centralized governance architectures across all three intervention periods underscores the theoretical importance of structural alignment between institutional design and the political sociology of host societies. Afghan segmentary social organization is not an obstacle to governance but an alternative mode of governance—one that has sustained collective life in highly challenging environmental, security, and geographic conditions over centuries (Barfield, 2021). The question is therefore not whether formal institutions can replace customary ones, but whether they can enter into productive institutional relationships with them that expand collective welfare without destroying social capital. The evidence across all three cases suggests that externally imposed institutions consistently failed this test not because of technical design failures but because of the fundamental structural mismatch between the assumptions of rational-legal authority—universalism, procedural formality, and hierarchical accountability—and the relational logic of customary Afghan governance—particularism, social embeddedness, and negotiated autonomy (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2020; Zürcher, 2021; Menkhaus, 2021).

The theoretical implication is that effective governance in environments with strong pre-existing customary authority requires hybrid institutional designs that formalize and extend the reach of customary mechanisms rather than replacing them—incorporating jirgas and shuras into statutory judicial and administrative frameworks, aligning formal administrative boundaries with existing social and tribal boundaries rather than imposing externally derived territorial grids, and building revenue systems that work through rather than around existing social networks of trust and obligation (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2020; Lake, 2021). This design imperative does not mean uncritical endorsement of all customary

practices—some of which may require reform through an internal political process—but it does mean accepting that external actors cannot determine the content of legitimate governance for the Afghan population (Murtazashvili, 2022).

7. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Afghanistan's troubled history with foreign-led state-building, examined across three discrete intervention eras spanning more than 180 years, yields a theoretically coherent and empirically grounded account of recurring governance failure. The analysis establishes that collapse was not the result of particular policy misjudgments, resourcing shortfalls, or individual leadership failures but was structurally overdetermined by the interaction of four mutually reinforcing mechanisms: structural misfit between imported governance designs and Afghan political sociology; delegitimizing cascades triggered by each successive failure of externally imposed institutions; the aid-rentier pathology through which massive external resource flows inverted the fiscal accountability relationship between state and society; and path-dependent lock-in through which each intervention reinforced the institutional configurations that made the next attempt more difficult. The consistency of this four-stage failure sequence across three most different cases—British imperial, Soviet socialist, and American liberal democratic—confirms that the mechanisms operate at a structural level independent of ideology, resource scale, or organizational form.

Three principal theoretical contributions emerge from this analysis. First, the study advances an integrated causal model that for the first time systematically connects legitimacy theory, path dependency, and the political economy of aid dependence into a single explanatory framework with explicit causal sequencing and operational indicators. Second, it demonstrates empirically that the interaction between these mechanisms is synergistic rather than merely additive: path-dependent social structures deny the state organic legitimacy, aid dependence removes the fiscal mechanism that might build legitimacy from below, aid rents captured by elite networks deepen institutional distrust, and the resulting delegitimating cascade sustains insurgent alternatives. Third, it generates a theoretically grounded operationalization of governance failure through observable proxies—aid-to-expenditure ratios, off-budget funding shares, armed uprising frequencies, and dispute resolution patterns—that enables comparative empirical analysis and methodological replication.

The policy implications of this analysis are concrete and structured around three mutually reinforcing institutional reforms. Each is derived directly from the causal mechanisms identified in the theoretical model, ensuring a closer correspondence between analytical diagnosis and prescriptive recommendation than is typically found in state-building scholarship.

Policy Recommendations

I. Transition to Hybrid Governance Architectures

- **Structural Shift:** Move from failed centralized presidential models toward hybrid systems that integrate customary institutions into statutory frameworks.
- **Two-Tier Governance:** Establish a decentralized architecture where provincial/district *jirgas* and *shuras* hold statutory recognition within the judicial and administrative sectors.
- **Defined Jurisdictions:** Grant local councils authority over specific jurisdictions with standardized procedures and formal appeal channels while limiting the central government to national defense, monetary policy, and macro-infrastructure.
- **Endogenous Process:** Ensure governance boundaries are determined by internal Afghan social actors to avoid the structural errors of externally imposed designs.

II. Prioritization of Domestic Revenue Mobilization

- **Mitigating Aid-Rentierism:** Address the "aid-rentier pathology" by reducing reliance on external resource provision, which historically undermines state-citizen accountability.
- **Fiscal Accountability:** Implement a sequenced strategy to increase domestic revenue through extractive industry sharing agreements and graduated trade/agricultural taxes.
- **Targeted Consolidation:** Aim to reduce the aid-to-expenditure ratio (e.g., from **75%** to below **40%** within a decade), modeled after successful fiscal consolidations in similar contexts.

- **On-Budget Channeling:** Shift external assistance toward on-budget mechanisms to strengthen state fiscal systems and build constituencies for reform.

III. Integration of Customary Institutions

- **Institutional Realism:** Recognize the persistent legitimacy of *jirgas*, *shuras*, and arbitration councils as foundational elements of the state rather than deficits.
- **Legal Pluralism:** Provide formal legal recognition and limited funding for customary dispute resolution in areas such as land tenure, water rights, and family law.
- **Administrative Alignment:** Harmonize formal administrative boundaries with existing tribal and community social structures to reduce friction.
- **Human Rights Safeguards:** Create interfaces between customary and statutory systems to ensure minimum individual rights protections through defined rights of appeal.

IV. Research Limitations and Scope

- **Source Constraints:** Primary reliance on English-language secondary sources may underrepresent the perspectives of rural and non-elite communities.
- **Generalizability:** The single-country focus (Afghanistan) necessitates further testing of the four-mechanism framework in other segmentary political environments.
- **Temporal Scope:** The lack of longitudinal analysis on post-intervention legacies suggests a need for further study into path dependency.

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